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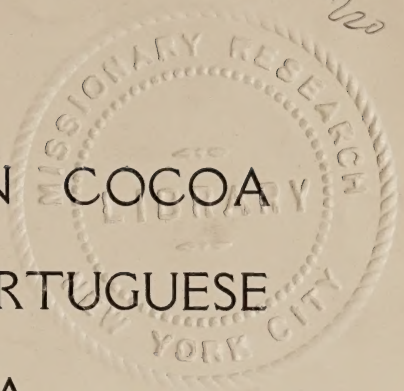

SLAVE LABOUR ON COCOA PLANTATIONS IN PORTUGUESE WEST AFRICA.

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By JOSEPH BURTT.

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SLAVE LABOUR ON COCOA PLANTATIONS.

[To the Editor of the "Spectator."]

Sir,—I have recently returned from Portuguese West Africa, where I have spent in all nearly two years in the islands of San Thomé and Principe, and travelling on the coast and in the interior investigating the conditions of coloured labour. May I lay before your readers the present position of so-called contract labour in that region?

The Portuguese islands of San Thomé and Principe employ some thirty thousand natives from Angola, who, though well cared for, have been taken there against their will, and, with some few exceptions, remain there till death. Twenty years ago the average yearly export of natives was about 2,200. ***In 1901 it reached 4,752, and the official figures for eight months in 1908 totalled 3,924, being at the rate of nearly six thousand natives a year.*** If six thousand are actually landed in the islands, how many are raided or betrayed in the interior to supply that number? Some are brought great distances, and day after day, for months, toil under a merciless sun towards the coast, weary, thirsty, sick at heart. I have seen them on the road, lean and scarred, their bent knees tottering under heavy loads. Many die and leave their bones by the wayside. Countless shackles that once secured their limbs at night lie rotting in the grass. On one occasion a whole caravan of slaves perished of small-pox on the road. In districts where food is difficult to obtain long marches must be made, and too often a loiterer has been buried alive, or hamstrung and left to perish as a warning to malingerers.

A vast region of the Southern Congo is overrun by the revolted native soldiers of the Congo Free State, who, armed with modern rifles and ammunition, pursue their occupation of slave-raiding under an ex-sergeant named Yambayamba. In one day they raided thirteen villages within twelve miles of a Belgian fort at Kayoyo. Some of them are cannibals; and a slave they had sold, when asked why they had not eaten him, replied that they scratched the arms of himself

and a companion, and after tasting the blood sold him and ate his companion. When I was in this district two years ago, slaves were being purchased from the revolters and sent in small gangs into Portuguese territory.

Though there is less open violence than formerly, it is obvious that only by deceit and force can natives be taken from their pleasant homes in the interior and sent to toil and die on an island the name of which has been a terror to them from childhood. Although on the fore-deck of the steamers one sees merely a crowd of quiet, well-dressed natives, it is impossible to conceive the sum of human misery their export represents. One cannot think in thousands ; but I recall the case of a young girl named Neyambi, sold by fraud about the time I was at Bihé. The mother, though only an ugly, wizened old native woman, was almost broken-hearted that her free-born daughter should be a slave. Husbands are separated from their wives, children from their parents. A missionary describes the case of a little girl captured in a Luvale raid whom he saw brooding over her woes. Luckily her father traced her, and bought her freedom for two slaves, twelve fowls, and a gun. While the redemption price was being struck, the sobbing child hugged her father, who caressed her, saying: "Never mind, my child ; although I have to borrow, I will take you home to-day." The export of each native has been the means of striking fear into a circle of people, and in some districts the natives live under a cloud of apprehension that is perhaps worse than their actual sufferings. To the total of those shipped and those that die on the road must be added those sold to natives or employed in commerce or agriculture in Angola.

The supposition that slavery is a thing of the past astonishes those with any knowledge of life in Central Africa. Acting Vice-Consul Beak, in an official Report dated September 6th, 1907, writes:—

> "Throughout Central Africa the question of slavery and slave-trading is a most difficult one, and I know from personal experience on the Niger and the Benue how very hard it is to check. There is nothing more ingrained in native habit and custom than slavery in one form or another."

For four centuries the European has availed himself of the practice of slavery in Angola, and it is to be feared there is no immediate prospect of putting an end to the evil custom.

Africa, so old and yet so young, is awakening from the sleep of ages. Her gems, her gold, her potentialities of agricultural wealth, have made her the world's desire. The vast fortunes occasionally

made there stimulate enterprise. The planter, the miner, the engineer, cry out for that coloured labour without which tropical Africa is useless, and an increasing demand, out of all proportion to the supply, tempts the unprincipled white to enslave the black man. For us at home, with rapid transport and just laws promptly enforced, it is difficult to conceive the inaccessibility and lawlessness of Africa. Crimes impossible here are safe and easy there. A young Englishman I met actually saw a man near the coast shoot down one of a gang of slaves. Before the fierce ambition, the knowledge, and the modern guns of the white man the native is as helpless as the grass before the wind-swept fires of his plains. Considering the monetary value of the black man, one is surprised, not that there is so much slavery, but that there is so little.

Slavery is not a national matter. The Portuguese are sometimes blamed as though their nation supported it. Even were it so, remembering our slave-trading record, and the treatment of child labour in our own factories not a century ago, it would behove us to go softly when accusing others of inhumanity. But, as a matter of fact, Portugal with the rest of Europe has long denounced slavery. "How," exclaims a Portuguese writer, "have we toiled to end this crime!" Portugal was a signatory to the Acts of Berlin in 1885 and Brussels in 1890, both of which were concerned with stopping slavery in Africa. Since the year 1874 some twenty decrees have been passed for the regulation and protection of Portuguese native labour. In aiding Portugal to keep these, her good laws, England is but acting in a friendly and loyal manner to her old ally. The forced export of natives to San Thomé has been boldly attacked by a portion of the Portuguese Press. In 1902 the *Premeiro de Janeiro* contained articles by Senhor Paulo Severo denouncing the betrayal of the native:—

> "The black man," he wrote, "is an ox, patient and willing up to now, but it can bear no more. It has been so harassed, so burdened, so goaded, so tortured, that it has put down its head and charged in a frenzy of fury against all who check its rush of blind unexpected rage."

In 1903 a Commission was held at Loanda to study the subject, and when its delegates asked the emigrants where they were going, what they would gain, and who was the other contracting party, they all seemed surprised and said: "I don't know where I am going, I don't know what I shall earn. The white man has done this." From a noteworthy pamphlet published by this Commission I extract the following:—

> "The export of labourers is serious from an economic point of view; degrading morally; repulsive to all humanitarian

> principles; and finally from a patriotic standpoint, will belittle us before modern civilisation that, not without reason, will brand us as slavers. No one in Angola, unless they be persons devoid of moral sense, approves of this dealing in natives, which will be the ruin of the Province and the shame of Portugal."

I could give columns of extracts from Portuguese papers of scathing criticisms of the so-called contract labour. The *Voz de Angola* perseveringly attacks the present system. In an issue of May last I read:—

> "Day by day, the number increases of those who, passionately loving their country and not wishing her to be disgraced, revolt against a traffic in humanity under the legal title of contracted labour."

A recent issue of the *Economista*, a Lisbon paper, writes:—

> "Let slavery, the wretched slavery that stains our name, disappear, and let free emigration take its place."

An influential and cultured Portuguese at Lorenzo Marques assured me that all educated Portuguese, with the exception of those who were financially interested, were opposed to forcing labourers from Angola to San Thomé, and experienced planters have told me of their dissatisfaction with the present system. Two Governors-General of Provinces have in conversation with myself expressed their conviction of the need for reform. The Acting Governor-General of Angola has recently banished from the province two slavers. In 1907 the Portuguese Colonial Minister made definite promises of reform which would doubtless have been kept but for the fall of the Ministry after the assassination of King Carlos. A Special Commissioner, Captain Paula Cid, has recently presented to the Portuguese Government a Report containing some important suggestions for the improvement of the system of recruiting labour in Angola.

I have shown that the deep-rooted vice of slavery is still extensively practised in Africa; that it is favoured by the present condition of the labour market; that this hateful thing is not truly Portuguese, but an excrescence on the national life; and, lastly, that the Portuguese Government is aroused to the sense of the necessity of reform.

Thanks to the refusal of large firms in England and elsewhere to buy slave-grown produce, we can now drink clean cocoa. This is satisfactory, and this action of business firms is a moral protest that will appeal to all. But the suffering natives will not benefit unless slavery is actually stopped, and there is little prospect of this at present, for, as the *Economista* pointed out some months ago, the only economic result of the boycott is that the cocoa goes to another

market. As a proof that there is no difficulty in disposing of the San Thomé cocoa, the *Jornal das Colonias* states that while in January, 1908, the Lisbon stock of cocoa was 120,015 sacks, by March this year it had been reduced to 82,765, and at the time of writing the stock was as low as 60,000 sacks, nearly all of which has already been sold to America. I ask, How does the native benefit by the action of these isolated firms? It is nothing to him where the produce is sold.

At present the subject is but little known or understood, and it is necessary that the whole case be clearly laid before the public at home and abroad so that the civilised world may decide whether or no so general an article of diet as cocoa shall in the twentieth century be grown by slave labour. America is first on the list of cocoa-consuming nations, having in 1907 used 37,526 metric tons against England's 20,159. Let her in this centenary year of Lincoln's birth raise her voice for freedom.

There is now a large mass of irrefutable evidence available. Commander Cameron, Consul Pickersgill, Colonel Colin Harding, and many others have borne testimony against the traffic in Angola. In 1905 Mr. Nevinson travelled along the great slave route from Benguella running eastward to the slave-raiding regions of the Congo and published a graphic account of what he saw in "A Modern Slavery." Two years later the Report of Dr. Horton and myself of our investigations in the same region was presented by the British Foreign Office to the Portuguese authorities at Lisbon.

But more significant than any other evidence are the official figures I have quoted of last year's export of labourers from Angola. If the nations cannot stop slave-raiding in the heart of Africa, they should at least be able to put an end to an illegal traffic on the coast. This would be an invaluable step towards freedom, for demand creates a supply of coloured labour as of any other commodity. At all events, let there be light as to actual facts, that wrongdoers may be shamed and the hands of the Portuguese strengthened for reform.—
I am, Sir, &c., JOSEPH BURTT.

9 Dover Street, Hull.

NOTE BY EDITOR OF THE "SPECTATOR."

We agree with Mr. Burt in holding that the Portuguese Government is in a position of very great difficulty, and also that the great majority of the Portuguese people are opposed to slavery, and sincerely anxious to be free from its curse. Unfortunately, Portugal has not the power to get rid of slavery. That is why we have urged that the only effective remedy is to be found in a refusal by the manufacturers to use slave-grown cocoa. The British firms, to their very great credit, have done their part. Will not the American people now do theirs? Could there be a year more appropriate than the centenary of Lincoln's birth? If the people of America would pledge themselves to drink no more slave-grown cocoa, they would raise the noblest and most magnificent memorial to Lincoln that the brain of man can conceive. Such a resolve would paralyse the hand of the slave-raider of Angola,—the man who now scours the inland regions in order that he may supply the plantations of the islands with *serviçaes*. The knowledge that there is always a price, and a good price, to be got on the coast for plantation labourers sets a flood of unspeakable cruelty and misery flowing. Strange as it sounds, the innocent demand for cocoa to drink or chocolate to eat by men, women, and children in America is only one end of a chain which at the other is shackled to the slave. Those who use San Thomé cocoa are unconsciously giving an order that slaves shall be hunted and caught in Angola and brought to the coast. A refusal to give any more orders for San Thomé cocoa till the planters use free labour will as surely, if more slowly, emancipate the slave as Lincoln's proclamation. Our voice has sometimes been listened to in America. We trust it may be heard now, and that those who can influence the American Press may induce that Press—a giant in its power alike for evil and for good—to remember in Lincoln's year the cry of the captives.